DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 445 CS 010 969

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TITLE Toward a Caring Reading Curriculum.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Educational Change; Elementary Education; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; *Social Responsibility; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Caring; Reading Uses

ABSTRACT

As a result of criticism of the schools, educators have made modifications in many reading curricula that have resulted in an increased emphasis on reading achievement and a lessened emphasis on using reading to help students develop citizenship, social responsibility, and caring. Reading instruction needs to be thought of not only in terms of the degree to which reading performance can be improved, but also in terms of the degree to which students learn to become socially responsible citizens. Reading teachers should be models of caring persons during reading instruction, listening attentively to students and giving help when needed. Homogeneous grouping and individualized instruction minimize opportunities to teach caring. Teachers should consider having students work together in pairs and small groups on reading and writing tasks for which the groups as a whole must bear responsibility. Cross-grade grouping often gives students real opportunities to help others and to be helped. Careful selection of reading materials and directing discussion of that material after it is read can lead to growth in caring and social responsibility. Finally, the way in which a teacher designs the reading environment in the classroom can help promote social interaction, caring, and cooperation among students. It is incumbent on reading educators to search for ways to promote the development of caring, citizenship, and social responsibility within the context of academically-oriented reading instruction. (RS)

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TOWARD A CARING
READING CURRICULUM

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1992

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Reading educators tend to think of reading education and reading curricula unidimensionally. That is, we specify one goal for reading instruction. That goal is reading achievement. We tend to judge the success or effectiveness of a particular method or approach in reading education on the extent to which the method or approach leads to gains in reading achievement. Methods that lead to gains in achievement, however measured, are determined to be good, desirable, appropriate for school.

Nevertheless, taken within the context of schooling in general, such a unidimensional view of reading is short sighted and has the potential for serious negative consequences. In addition to a goal that is directed at the academic achievement of students, American schools have traditionally maintained another goal that is more social, attitudinal, and affective in nature. That goal has been variously described as the development of citizenship in students, the fostering of altruism or a sense of caring in children, and the growth of a sense of community and social responsibility in students. While such goals may be described as "soft" or hard to define and operationalize, and their achievement as immeasurable using traditional quantitative procedures, this second set of goals has been, nevertheless, articulated throughout the development of American schools and is a set of goals for which there is, even today, little dissent from teachers and the general public.

Recent criticism of the schools (e.g. National

Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) has focused on the apparent declining achievement of students in academic areas. The schools are failing, such critics report, to satisfy the academic goal. As a result of this perceived failing the nation is presumed to be at risk of falling behind other countries in technological advancement and innovation.

As a result of such criticism educators have increased their efforts toward improving the academic side of schooling. Programs, methods and policies have been devised to increase academic performance. These actions may be having some effect, as recent reports of students academic performance in this country have noted a leveling off of the decline in achievement as measured by test scores and, in some cases, even a modest rise was indicated.

While these curricular modifications have been welcomed by the public, the changes in many instances, have produced an unwelcome and generally invisible side effect. The increased emphasis on academic achievement has lead to a decreased emphasis, and in some cases a general abandonment, of the goal of social development, caring, and citizenship in students. As increased time is given over to academic instruction less time becomes available for the development of social responsibility and caring. As curriculum and instruction become tighter, allowing for greater amounts of time on task, fewer opportunities are available in the classroom to talk about and promote caring, citizenship and

altruism.

This type of scenario is particularly true in the reading curriculum. Modifications in many reading curricula have resulted in an increased emphasis on the so called academic skills of reading. It is these skills that are then often tested on state-wide or local tests of reading achievement and for which teachers are most accountable. As a result, teachers feel an obligation to provide extraordinary amounts of instruction in these areas.

Greater emphasis in one area usually means a lessening of emphasis in other areas. This is true of reading instruction. Because teachers have an increased need to emphasize the academic skill areas, fewer opportunities for using reading to foster social development became available. Teachers have fewer chances to discuss the motives of a story's characters from a caring perspective. Opportunities for using reading and writing to explore one's own feelings toward others or for expressing a kindness to someone else decrease. Students have fewer chances to share a story with a classmate or someone from a lower grade. As a result of the increased emphasis on academics and the neglect of social development, schools run the risk of contributing to the alienation of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1974) from their communities and fellows.

A CARING READING CURRICULUM

The increased unidimensionality of the school's reading program produces a hazard that we as reading educators cannot ignore. Reading does not exist in a social, moral,

and value vacuum. Reading allows values and ethics to be communicated and reflected upon. Reading can help people to build a sense of community with others.

Because of this, reading instruction offers potentially ideal opportunities for helping students develop citizenship, social responsibility, and caring. We need to think of reading instruction not only in terms of the degree to which reading performance can be improved, but also in terms of the degree to which students learn to become socially responsible citizens. I call a reading curriculum that fosters social development a caring reading curriculum. In the remainder of this paper I will discuss specific ways in which a caring reading curriculum can be implemented.

First, teachers act as powerful models for their students. Reading teachers should be models of caring persons during reading instruction. This can be implemented in numerous ways. Teachers, above all should listen attentively and responsively to students. Few things for children are more demeaning than to be ignored or dismissed by a teacher when a child has something important to say. Teachers, moreover, should be willing to provide help to students in reading when help is needed. Teachers are often so busy that providing special help to children experiencing difficulty in reading can prove burdensome. Nevertheless, the very nature of caring requires that help be given when needed and/or requested. Although such actions are often subtle and apparently unnoticed by students, the fact is

that students have strong memories of teachers who were both caring and uncaring in their behavior toward students. Adults, when asked to pick a specific positive or negative event in school involving a teacher, often choose an event that portrays a teacher as a caring and giving or, conversely, as an uncaring and mean spirited person.

Grouping practices are a central part of reading instruction. Teachers of reading often group students into relatively homogeneous groups by ability. Even though students are assigned to groups, however, their work within a group is usually done alone. Another relatively popular model of reading instruction is termed individual instruction. Here students primarily work alone on individual lessons prescribed by the teacher.

In both of these models the opportunities to teach caring and allow for caring to occur are minimized. Through their grouping practices teachers can have a major impact on students development of caring and social responsibility. Recent research headed by Slavin (Stevens, Madden, Slavin, & Farnish, 1987) and Johnson and Johnson (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec, & Roy, 1984), for example, suggest that academic and social learning can be expected from grouping students in such a way that they must cooperatively work on an assigned task. In reading, then, teachers should consider having students work together in pairs and small groups on reading or writing related tasks for which the group as a whole must bear responsibility. This could mean something as simple as reading to one another and receiving evaluative

feedback from one's own parents or friends, or it could mean working collaboratively on an integrated thematic unit on some topic.

Grouping does not necessarily have to occur only with students at the same grade level. Cross-grade grouping often gives students real opportunities to help others and to be helped. In these types of situations one student could help one or two other students in lower grades by reading to them, listening to them read, and/or helping them complete challenging assignments in reading. In cases such as these both the younger and older students benefit academically. Moreover, the older student enjoys the satisfaction of being able to help care for others in need of help.

Careful selection of reading materials and directing discussion of that material after it is read can lead to growth in caring and social responsibility. The reading materials children are given, both in trade books and as a basal are not without content reflecting a caring/self centered set of themes. Shannon (1986), for example, found that recent award winning children's trade books tended to portray themes that reflected a self-centered perspective on the part of the main character(s).

These underlying themes in school reading material can affect students' notions about caring and social responsibility. Teachers should be certain that at least some of the narrative texts that children are exposed to

portray characters whose motivation stems from a desire to be caring and helpful toward others. Moreover, teachers can direct discussion of story material to examine the motivations and orientation to others that characters maintain. Such discussions are appropriate for material that portray characters as selfish as well as caring. By pointing out these characteristics and helping students examine and judge the motivations that drive characters in reading materials, teachers will help students grow in an appreciation and understanding of what it means to be a caring person.

Finally, the way in which a teacher designs his or her reading environment in the classroom can help promote social interaction, caring, and cooperation among students. For example, a teacher can choose to arrange students desks to either force isolation or encourage interaction among students. A teacher interested in fostering interaction and caring among students would probably arrange students desks so that students can see and talk with others. In addition, teachers should insure that desks are rearranged often enough so that proximal contact among the largest number of students is achieved. A reading corner in a classroom should be a comfortable place where students can go to read and talk about books with others. Teachers can make the reading corner an inviting place with a minimum of materials. A rug, some old furniture, and some pillows is enough to create an ambiance that invites students interested in reading to come together to share a book or to

chat about something that was read. Decorating the classroom with student work and accomplishments in reading, as well as other subject areas, rather that the dull commercially available materials, demonstrates to students that the teacher does indeed value and care about their work and achievements.

CONCLUSION

The position taken in this paper is not an attempt to lessen the importance of the academic goal of reading instruction. Rather the point that I tried to make is that it is folly to allow ourselves to abandon the social responsibility, citizenship, and caring goals of schools. Ways to care and ways to teach caring must be integrated into all areas of the school curriculum. Since reading and reading instruction take up a major portion of the elementary school day and because reading is, to a large extent, a social activity, it is incumbent on reading educators to search for ways to promote the development of caring, citizenship, and social responsibility within the context of academically-oriented reading instruction.

In this paper a few approaches for fostering caring during and through reading were explored. There are, most certainly, other ways to promote caring in reading. In the final analysis, however, we must not allow ourselves to forget that through schooling and through reading we are preparing children for a future in the real world. Do we want those students to enter the world with academic skills,

that can be used for self-promotion and self-satisfaction? Or would we like to see students using their skills and talents out of sense of citizenship and caring for others. If the second outcome is the one we desire then we must foster caring and citizenship in students through reading and through the other academic areas in which they are receiving preparation.

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